

PROCEEDINGS  
OF THE  
BIOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON

---

NOTES ON THE NAMES OF CERTAIN NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS.

BY E. W. NELSON.

---

During my recent study of the Mexican birds in the collection of the Biological Survey, some facts have come to light which appear to necessitate changes in the nomenclature of several species.

I am indebted to Dr. Chas. W. Richmond of the National Museum for calling my attention to the literature in some of the cases mentioned below, and to Mr. J. H. Riley of the National Museum for his courtesy in helping me with the comparisons of the turkey buzzards. Acknowledgments are also due Mr. Witmer Stone of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, and Mr. Outram Bangs of the Museum of Comparative Zoology for the loan of material.

SULA LEUCOGASTRA Boddaert.

In the original description of *Pelecanus sula* (Syst. Nat. ed. 12, I, p. 218, 1766) Linnaeus characterizes it as less than half the size of *bassana*, with the body white, the outer part of the primaries and secondaries black, and the face and feet red.

This description in no way fits the bird recognized by most later authors under the name of *Sula sula*, which has the head, neck and upperparts (including the tail) dark sooty brown ;

the underparts white, and the feet green. The references given by Linnæus with the original description, however, belong mainly to this last mentioned bird. Gmelin followed in 1788 with a composite description under *Pelecanus sula* in which he includes Linnæus' statement that the body is white and contradictory matter of his own, stating that the species is dark brown with the underside of the body white.

The bird with the dark brown upperparts and white lowerparts was first named in 1783 by Boddaert, who called it *Sula leucogastra* (Tabl. Plan. Enl. p. 57). Since then authors have usually treated *leucogastra* as a synonym of *sula*. This may have originated from the error of Gmelin in confusing the two species and perhaps even more probably from the references given by Linnæus which do not belong under the bird he describes. In any case, when the application of an author's description is obvious it is necessary to accept it and not his references to fix the name. In this case it appears that the specific name *sula* should become a synonym of *piscator*, and *Sula leucogastra* Boddaert be used for the species which has so long gone under the name *Sula sula*.

#### ACCIPITER VELOX PACIFICUS (Lesson).

In 1888 Mr. Ridgway described the western sharp-shinned hawk as *Accipiter velox rufilatus* (Proc. U. S. Nat. Mus., XI, p. 92) taking as the type a specimen from Fort Bridger, Wyoming. In 1845, however, Lesson gives a good description of the male western sharp-shinned hawk from specimens taken at Acapulco, Guerrero, Mexico, and California, under the name *Nisus pacificus* (Echo du Monde Savant, June 19, 1845, Col. 1086) so that the western sharp-shinned hawk, if a recognizable form, becomes *Accipiter velox pacificus* (Lesson). This bird occurs only as a winter visitor to Acapulco for which reason the birds of California may be taken as typical of this form.

#### CATHARTES AURA (Linnæus).

The common turkey buzzard of North America was named by Linnæus in the 10th Edition of his *Systema Naturæ* (p. 86, 1758). He called it *Vultur aura* and mentioned only a single

character, the white bill, that is particularly diagnostic of the bird to which the name is commonly applied. In the 12th edition of the *Systema* however, the feet are said to be flesh colored and the head red. These additions definitely fix the name. This becomes of importance, since two distinct birds are included in the references cited by Linnæus. Of these *Uruba brasiliensis* Maregrave appears to be the small yellowheaded buzzard since named (*Enops pernigra* by Sharpe (Cat. Birds Brit. Mus. I, p. 26, 1874).

The remaining principal references are four, two of which are from the West Indies, one from Mexico, and the other from the southeastern United States. In the Mexican reference the common name *aura* is quoted from Hernandez—this evidently is the source of the name used by Linnæus, and it is of interest to find that *aura* is still the common name of this vulture throughout Mexico. In 1839 Wied in the account of his trip from Rockport, Indiana, to Owensboro, Kentucky, calls attention to the differences between the vultures of this group in Brazil and those of North America (*Reise in das Innere Nord-America* I. p. 162, footnote, 1839). He considers that the Brazilian bird is the true *Cathartes aura*, and gives to the birds of North America the provisional name of *Cathartes septentrionalis*. In these notes Wied describes a pair of North American birds in considerable detail, but does not specify any definite locality for them. Fortunately he published a later and more elaborate paper upon the same subject (*Journal für Ornithologie* 1856, p. 119), and again describes a pair of North American birds which were taken on the Wabash River near New Harmony, Indiana, where he stayed for some time while visiting Thomas Say. As the measurements are identical in both of these descriptions it becomes evident that these birds were the types of *Cathartes septentrionalis*, and enables us to fix the type locality. The name *Vultur aura* of Linnæus as originally used applied to all the red-headed vultures of the United States, Mexico, and the West Indies. Recent collections from Mexico and the West Indies show that the birds of these regions are very much smaller than those of the northern United States. The series available for comparison shows that the extremes of the two forms are connected by regular gradation through the intervening territory. These differences between the birds of the two regions appear to

be great enough to necessitate the recognition of two geographic forms. This being the case, we have *Cathartes aura septentrionalis* (Wied) for the large northern form ranging from the British possessions throughout the United States to northern Mexico. The original name is restricted to the small bird of Mexico, Central America, and the West Indies. The southern form may be considered typical in the State of Vera Cruz, Mexico, which is the region where it was found by Hernandez, upon whose account Linnæus largely based his original description.

The Vera Cruz bird was again named in 1845 when Cassin described *Cathartes burrovianus* from a specimen collected near the city of Vera Cruz (Proc. Acad. Nat. Sci. Philadelphia, 1845, p. 212). This name has given rise to some difference of opinion among ornithologists. By some it has properly been considered as a small *Cathartes aura*. Others have treated it as a distinct species. Fortunately Cassin's type is extant and through the courtesy of Mr. Witmer Stone of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia I have recently had the opportunity to examine it.

A careful comparison of this type with a considerable series of birds from the United States, Cuba, the Isle of Pines and various parts of Mexico makes it evident that it is a typical specimen of the small turkey buzzard which occurs throughout southern Mexico, Central America and the West Indies. It is in nearly fresh black plumage but the upper side of the shafts of the primaries are bleached old ivory white to within two or three inches of the tips. The opening through the nostrils has been distorted at the anterior end by a cord used to tie together the mandibles of the fresh bird. This distortion of the nostril from the same cause is shown in a number of other specimens examined. The type of *burrovianus* is a mounted bird with the skin of the back of the neck distorted in such a way as to carry the feathering higher up on the nape than normal and thus furnish one of the supposed characters of the species.

Birds from Vera Cruz, Cuba, and the Isle of Pines are about the same in size but the island birds have heavier bills. The Jamaica bird is even smaller than the one in Cuba.

Birds from northern Mexico, including Lower California and the entire southern border of the United States, are distinctly larger than those from Vera Cruz and Cuba and there appears

to be a constant increase in size to the northern part of the birds' range.

The typical form of *Cathartes aura* differs from the northern bird in smaller size ; narrower and less well marked brown borders to the feathers of the back (the brown border sometimes entirely lacking). The color of the upper side of the shafts of the primaries (brown when freshly moulted) soon bleaches to an old ivory, or yellowish white.

*Cathartes aura septentrionalis* differs from the typical form in larger size ; more pronounced brown borders to the feathers of the upperparts, and the upper side of the shafts of the primaries usually remain permanently dusky brown.

The following measurements give an idea of the differences in size between the two forms.

*Cathartes aura* :

Male (?), near city of Vera Cruz, Mexico. (Type of *C. burrovianus*). Wing, 475 ; tail, 215 ; tarsus, 62.

Female, Southern Vera Cruz (April 7, 1901, Bangs Coll.). Wing, 475 ; tail, 233 ; tarsus, 63.

*Cathartes aura septentrionalis* :

Male, Washington, D. C. (Dec. 25.) Wing, 553 ; tail, 320 ; tarsus, 74.5.

Male, Mt. Carmel, Ill. (Aug. 1.) Wing, 550 ; tail, 320 ; tarsus, 67.

#### TANGAVIUS INVOLUCRATUS Lesson.

In the *Revue Zoologique* for February, 1839, p. 41, Lesson describes *Tangavius involucratus* from a Mexican specimen in the Abeille Collection as follows : “ *T. corpore nigro æneoque ; alis, et cauda atrocærulescente splendentibus ; colli plumis, amplis, dilatate involucrum formantibus.* ” This description evidently applies to a form of *Callothrus*, and since numerous other new birds described from the Abeille Collection about the same time were from eastern Mexico it is fair to infer that the present species came from the same region. Both generic and specific names appear to be used for the first time in the place quoted above ; *Callothrus* of Cassin, 1866, is thus antedated by *Tangavius* of Lesson, 1839, and *involucratus* replaces *robustus* for the name of the bird of eastern Mexico.



The birds of this genus in western Mexico have hitherto been considered specifically distinct from those of eastern Mexico but the series in the Biological Survey Collection show that about the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and southward intergradation takes place so that a rearrangement of the Mexican forms becomes necessary. The South American species becomes *Tangavius armenti* (Cabanis) and the Mexican species should stand as follows :

*Tangavius æneus æneus* (Wagler) Western Mexico.

“            “    *assimilis* (Nelson) Southwestern Mexico.

“            “    *involucratus* (Lesson) Eastern Mexico.